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ABSTRACT

The extensive use of improvisational techniques in rehearsals for chamber theatre productions develops for the performer a strong engagement with the text. The director can channel the movement and gestures that emerge from these techniques into the production itself, with results that more effectively convey the literature than traditional rehearsal methods usually produce. Such a process has benefits for the performers as well as for the production: the performers learn the lines of script without the constant repetition of traditional rehearsals and their improvisations help cocreate--with the director--the staging of the text, thereby increasing their involvement in the production. (RL)

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CREATIVE COLLABORATION: THE REHEARSAL PROCESS IN CHAMBER THEATRE

by

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CREATIVE COLLABORATION: THE REHEARSAL PROCESS IN CHAMBER THEATRE

The rehearsal process in chamber theatre is a crucial phenomenon for stimulating the performer's understanding of and engagement with the text. Yet, due to the time constraints of production, all too often rehearsals are given over to remembering and reciting words and moving through memorized blocking. This kind of rehearsal locks performers and director into routine procedures which obscure the text and divorce them from it. The performers know the words but can remain untouched by the full emotion and imagination behind those linquistic symbols.

If, however, we view the rehearsal process not as a period primarily for solidifying and pinning down the text but as a time for exploring the imaginative parameters that it elicits,[1] then each rehearsal has the potential to stimulate a melding of performer and text. During such a process performers can be encouraged to develop a cooperative, imaginative configuration for the stage which is the result of the creative insights of the entire cast as well as of the director. Through this expanded purpose and context for the rehearsal process, the director develops a series of exercises to evoke creative involvement with the text. The exercises may require thought and some preparation outside of rehearsal time, but the majority of them revolve around improvisation during rehearsal. Improvisation promotes spontaneous response to ideas and circumstances, inspires use of the imagination, fosters acceptance of the fictional worlds of the text, and helps performers avoid stereotypic movement and thought. Through improvisational techniques, performers and director experiment with ideas, embodied in physical expression, in order to find the most compelling illustrations of the text. After leading the

cast through such exercises, the director then guides and refines the results into the actual performance. I call this process "creative collaboration." It refers to the exploration and unification between performers and the text and among the performers themselves. In this paper, I shall explore and describe this process and its benefits.

Initial Phases of Exploration: Creative Emergence of the Text

The initial phase of creative exploration of the literature in rehearsal must be preceded by sessions which emphasize analytical understanding of the text. Only after such analysis can the performers realize the range of appropriate responses that they may make in the creative exercises which follow. While students analyze the original uncut text closely, it is the director's adapted script with which they work in rehearsals. The director must have some strong conceptual notions of how this script might be staged before conceiving the exercises that will enable the performers to become creative collaborators.

Most of the improvisational exercises that the director designs should be shaped ultimately by the particular demands of the style of the text. Congruence between the type of the exercise and the style of the text helps improve the likelihood that the visual effects will appropriately convey the text being staged. For example, writers of fanciful fiction, such as Lewis Carroll or Tolkien, often make up their own words in order to convey an imaginative world or to poke fun at the real one. In developing an exercise that would help performers become imaginatively involved with such fiction, the director might fabricate words of his or her own, spontaneously calling them out and asking the performers to respond physically to them. I used such a technique in rehearsals for Harlan Ellison's "'Repent Harlequin' Said the Ticktockman!" a story which projects a frightening but silly world of

the future, in which nonsensical extremes are emphasized by many made-up names that are interspersed among real ones. The text tells us of a sinister, futuristic bureaucratic staff that helps the government punish people who are tardy for appointments by taking the amount of minutes or hours they are late off of their lives. In preparing the cast to embody the foolishly nefarious creatures that Ellison leads us to believe that "ferrets," "commex," "loggers," "finks," and "mineez" are, I conjured up my own make-believe words that were rich in texture and sound. Commands to "galompdoodle around the room," "sniggle-snaggle over to the corner," or "move like a schnaazz" initially surprised and subsequently delighted the cast. After a few such "word" stimulus sessions, which were worked into rehearsals partly as a break from more tedious stretches of concentration, cast members were able to create sensory and emotional responses to imaginative vocabularies. The exercise helped performers gain a sense of the fancifulness of Ellison's particular style in this story, and it developed eager and creative commex and mineez who amused and stimulated audience members.

Coordination of textual style and performance style may be achieved through improvisational exercises that take a variety of forms. Despite the fact that words are out ultimate concern in chamber theatre, many of the exercises need to be designed to take us beneath and beyond words. Some of the most useful techniques involve non-verbal emphases. For example, if the director can find non-vocal music that reflects the mood, the theme, a character, an interaction, or an event in a work, particularly if it is unfamiliar to the performers so that they do not respond with preconceived movements, he or she may be able to evoke feelings and ideas that might not surface in conventional discussions.

This sort of evocation of an idea through music occurred during rehearsals for Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles. The cast had discussed Bradbury's descriptions of Martian society as well as his images of the physical attributes of the race. Yet the performers responded only cognitively to how Martians might move, and they felt awkward and nervous about trying out such movement for performance. After extensive searching, I found a rich, abstract piece of music that emphasized sustained echoes and ethereal sounds. The time spent in the music search was quickly recompensed in rehearsal as the music triggered responses that had remained veiled and reactions to ideas that had seemed elusive. Suddenly, the cast was moving in ways they had not been able to conceive during discussion.

Creative non-verbal exercises particularly aid the performer in emotively understanding and imaginatively conveying the subtext of a piece of literature. The connection between subtext and use of the body for the interpreter is described by Coger and Pelham who state:

> words have inherent actions and . . . supply only the verbal text, supported by a subtext of emotions and attitudes which are the most important part of the communication process. Interpreters Theatre participants, who must share the full complexity of literature with an audience while utilizing a defined space, must know how to train their bodies, control their bodies, and use their bodies to aid them in communicating the subtext of the literature.[2]

Yet, as Roloff points out, "It is not easy to restore the wisdom of the body."[3] Creative exercises which revolve around improvisation, however, help to promote this restoration. Through them, the performer becomes more comfortable

translating ideas into bodily response. One such exercise that I use extensively calls for translation of a character's rhythm through hand clapping. Clapping out character or narrator rhythm as it evolves through the story helps the performer sense the distinctive tempo that emerges based upon the goals and desires that propel the character or the narrator. The exercise also allows the performer to recognize the variations in that tempo based upon event and interaction. A performer clapping out the rhythm of Walter Mitty, for example, would use far bolder, more intense brisk clapping when Mitty was fancying himself as a brave Navy hydroplane commander than when he was thrust back into his normal banal existence with a nagging wife, overshoes, and puppy biscuits. After the cast has listened to one another's understanding of character or narrator through clapping, I ask them to improvise and coordinate their clapping with the other characters with whom they interact, in order to reflect and guide the rhythm of the entire story.

This simple, nonverbal exploration of the characters and narrators serves as an effective prelude to extending rhythmic exploration to the entire body. The need for exercises which accomplish this more complex extension is implicitly confirmed by Arnheim who points out how little we use the entire body. He states, "In daily life the head alone performs a good deal of action while the body rests, an essentially unconcerned base."[4] In the inner life of the character, which chamber theatre can so aptly reveal, however, this head emphasis should be reversed. If the performer is to convey the dreams, desires, and thoughts of the character, then the ability to translate the inner character through the entire body is essential.

I ask my performers to enhance that translation by working out a series of movements or dance which reflects their character or narrator and to share that dance with the rest of the group.[5] Although such an assignment may initially seem somewhat intimidating to a performer who is used to relying primarily upon words for expression, the previous clapping has helped ease the performer over awkwardness that he or she may feel in presenting these dances. Rhythmically suggesting a character or narrator with one's entire body now seems like a "logical" extension of the rhythms developed in the clapping. The creation of character dances further encourages the performer to go beneath as well as through the text. Nuances of the subtext must be explored in order for the interpreter to decide the tempo and style of the dance, the use of space, the focus, the variation and repetition and the dominant emphases of various parts of the body. In a recent production of Kurt Vonnegut's short story, "Adam," a performer was to play the role of a proud young father sharing news of his son's birth over the phone. The character dance which he devised emphasized the chest and was characterized by long, quick strides. He was asked to channel this movement into performance in which the pride and joy of his phone conversation was underscored dramatically by the posture and movement he had invented.

Character dances can be combined, as the rhythmic clapping was, to reflect the interaction of the character throughout the story. It is fascinating and useful for performers to spontaneously adjust their dances to the tempo and movement of others. Such coordination also gives performers and director significant creative insight into placement of narrators in relationship to the characters and into the extent of empathetic movement between narrator and characters. Character dance interaction rehearsals for F. Scott Fitzgerald's story, "The Ice Palace," for example, provided me with some

excellent blocking ideas. As I watched the dance-like interweaving of the Southern girl lost in the chilling Northern edifice of ice and the narrator whose primary omniscience was with this character, I developed ideas about how these performers might relate to each other physically throughout the entire story.

From a directorial perspective, the very choice of material for narrative staging can be influenced by the expectation of using creative exercises to explore the text. The theoretical concept behind chamber theatre encourages the presentation of literature which probes the emotional and psychological make-up of a character. In this sense, the director of chamber theatre can attempt the presentation of material that is vastly different from traditional works for the stage. Yet, from a practical standpoint, works which emphasize the thoughts and feelings of one character can be lacking in the elements which create interesting theatre. In literature written specifically for the theatre, a character can be in conflict primarily with himself or herself, but unless the character is also in conflict with others, that individual does not often hold audience attention. An introspective Hamlet, for example, is more compelling, because he confronts Claudius, Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In choosing a text which may unravel the workings of one psyche, the director of chamber theatre confronts the problem of how to dynamically stage an inner exploration which will sustain the interest of the audience.

A good example of this challenge lies in staging Anais Nin's novella, Stella. Nothing really "happens" in a traditional dramatic sense in Stella. There is no storyline, few characters besides Stella, and little interaction. The emphasis is, instead, upon Stella's private needs and fears. The choosing of such a piece for staging could be approached with more security if a director knew that the action on the stage could convey dynamically the fascinating

labyrinth of Stella's psyche. The use of improvisational techniques in rehearsals would provide a most effective means for the performers of such a piece to discover non-literal movement, corresponding to the non-linear movement of Stella's inner landscape.

Selection and Refinement of Creative Results

Once a director has developed exercises that stimulate a performer's engagement with a specific text, a major task is to select the most appropriate, imaginative, and compelling behaviors that have been elicited during exercises for use in the actual performance. In this stage of rehearsal, a director may encourage, for example, the repetition of individual movements that are evoked by certain performers or may select several spatial-gestural-movement interactions among performers for use in the performance. The director's use of selected improvisational effects in blocking allows a cast member to do in performance what feels comfortable and appropriate to his or her sense of the literature.

A recent production of Vonnegut's "Welcome to the Monkey House" greatly benefitted from use of improvisational effects in the blocking. Vonnegut's text initially contains an informative, humorous description of futuristic American society. The six narrators who poured forth this description engaged in improvisational experimentation in order to discover how to maximize their gestures, movements, focuses, and spatial relationships during the narration, attempting to bring alive silly but provocative lines, such as those about overpopulation which proclaimed, "The people were virtually packed together like drupelets. Drupelets are the pulpy little knobs that compose the outside of a raspberry." Careful directorial selection of the results that emerged during rehearsals produced narrators who filled the stage

with imaginative ensemble body work with which they felt very comfortable and which involved and delighted their audiences.

Another creative task that emerges for the director from exploratory rehearsals is to refine, channel, and focus individual experimentation so that it melds in performance to form an artistic and organic whole. Arnheim implicitly emphasizes the need for such a synthesizing eye when he states:

> When dancers and actors coordinate the kinesthetic with the visual medium, learning how much to give is a major problem . . . we can judge the size and strength of our motions in relation to one another, but we have little concept of their impact as a visual image in the surrounding field. The dancer must learn how large or fast a gesture should be in order to achieve the desired effect. Of course the proper dimensions depend also on the function of the movement pattern in the whole performance.[6]

The director performs not only as facilitator during these creative rehearsals, but also as enlightened spectator whose perceptions serve as a measure and guide for appropriate coalescence of the whole performance.

Rehearsals and the Creative Growth of the Performer

While imaginative discovery and creative enhancement of the text are primary results of exploratory rehearsals, such rehearsals provide important secondary effects as well. Improvisational exercises, which closely resemble play, release performer's mind and body from tension, diminish self-consciousness, help cast members come together as an ensemble, and allow performers to recognize that serious work can be produced pleasurably. To heighten a sense of play and ensemble during a recent production, for example, I asked that

the entire cast meet each night in the lobby of the theatre in which we rehearsed and move toward the stage area as a collective aggregate creature -- such as a caterpillar or as a unified object such as a jello mold or a rubber-band. They did so, at first, tentatively, but this awkwardness soon gave way to happy expectation concerning the results that would emerge. The benefits that this sense of play can have upon the individual and the group are confirmed by Mansell who tells us, "it is the play experience in creative drama which provides creative energy and access to the imaginative and aesthetic dimensions of experience. A sense of unity, mutual affirmation, and identification arise from . . . collective play experience."[7]

The coalescence between play and the evocation of literature that can emerge from it is aptly summed up by Roloff when he states, "Play suggests that the individual or group of individuals is/are willing to allow something to happen to them . . . It is a response of the body in its playful suppleness to entertain images and make them beholden to the moment.[8]

Conclusion

The kind of creative rehearsal I advocate does indeed take time. I spend, for example, two whole weeks devoted entirely to such rehearsals before any blocking is done at all and then continue to use smaller units of time to extend the exploration while we move into blocking. I ask performers to devote time outside of rehearsals to reading the text so that they can guide the imaginative and emotive insights gained from improvisation and creative exercises into the author's words. This is qualitatively a different process from memorization, but the performers learn the lines just as quickly as if they were asked to begin to memorize as soon as

rehearsals start. There is, moreover, not the text fatigue associated with the constant repetition of someone else's words. The performance, instead, is guided by the distinct vision of the individual performer while he or she fulfills the writer's intention. Performers have, to an extent, co-created the text with the author. At the same time, they have co-created the staging of the text with the director.

FOOTNOTES

[1]A more limited phase for such rehearsals is acknowledged by Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, and Phillis Reinstra Jeffrey in Group Performance of Literature (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 28-29. Benefits of creative rehearsals are also discussed by a small but enthusiastic group of play directors. See, for example, an interview by Gretdna A. Doty, with "Gerald Freedman On Building a Character," Literature in Performance, 1 (November, 1980), p. 59, and Robert Cohen and John Harrop, Creative Play Direction (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

[2]"Kinesics Applied to Interpreters Theatre," The Speech Teacher 24 (March, 1975), p. 92.

[3]The Perception and Evocation of Literature (Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1973), p. 3.

[4]Art and Visual Perception (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974), p. 405.

[5]For a discussion of the importance of interpreter training in dance-like movement, see Adeline Hirschfield-Medalia, "Stylized Movement in Interpreters Theatre," Communications Education, 25 (March 1975), 111-120.

[6]Ibid., p. 497.

[7]"Dimensions of Play Experience," Communications Education, 29 (January, 1980), pp. 43-53.

[8]"The Victoria File," in Richard Haas, Theatres of Interpretation (Ann Arbor: Roberts-Burton, 1976), p. 45.